

ED HERBST'S NEW HOPPER

By Tom Sutcliffe

I'd not troubled too much about Eddie Herbst's new hopper pattern until fairly recently, privately thinking it was an unlikely creation for trout, too synthetic for my liking, with its foam body and rubber legs, and way too involved to tie quickly, which I prefer. Besides, on the rare occasions in the past that I actually fished hoppers I was happy with patterns like Dave Whitlock's hopper (though its deer hair head is something of a drawback), the Letort hopper designed by Ernie Schweibert and more recently, Joe's Hopper, a neat Midwestern fly that looks very much like an *Invicta* with the wing tied flat and a hackle up front. This pattern has worked well and I have stayed with it ever since as the panacea for all hopper fishing opportunities.

I have always believed only a few simple ingredients are needed for successful artificial hoppers. They should have a touch of yellow and red in them, hit the water with something of a splat and ride as low as possible without actually sinking. That's much as you find the natural. Frankly, there are hundreds of variations on a theme that meet these basic requirements with the result that there are about as many hopper patterns out there as there are anglers. Interesting thing is few people get as fussy about exactly the way a hopper pattern looks or at least as fussy as they do, say, about their tricos or midge patterns. Exact hopper imitation seems to have got a little neglected in fly fishing, probably because when it comes to actual patterns most of us can't imagine trout getting too tense about detail, as long as what's presented is the right shape, looks fat, twitches and shows a bit of colour. Nor do we imagine trout ever rising selectively to hoppers. That just never happens or if it does, has certainly passed me by. Hoppers on any water are relatively rare and opportunistic event so when one does end up drifting over a feeding trout most often it gets hit boldly and without a second thought. Trout show little restraint or gentleness when it comes to taking them. If they gently sip mayflies or slowly gulp spinners and midges, they smack grasshoppers.

If all this is so, then why don't we fish hoppers more often, or at least 99% more than we do? I mean if the trout find them so irresistible why are they not the most used pattern on earth? - and we know for a fact they are not. It seems to me that trout may just be a lot more discerning about hopper patterns than we have given them credit for. Also, that patterns developed until now probably fall short of the mark, inter-alia because they have not enjoyed the concentrated attention that the mayflies, the midges and the like have had. Particularly, the triggers that induce takes on hoppers are imperfectly understood by most of us. It's also likely, seeing as most anglers rarely use hoppers, that we don't know how best to fish them, so the yield per cast on the pattern is not encouraging. Finally though, it may just be that some guys, someplace, may be hauling fish in on hoppers hand over fist and not saying a word about it.

Ed Herbst is one of those guys, only he is talking. For some time Ed has worked with the Orvis 'Quick Sight' ant foam bodies in the hope of developing a serviceable hopper pattern. Bit by bit he has made progress and bit by bit he has shared it with me, and with half a dozen other anglers, but few took the slightest notice, putting it all down to just another of

Ed's transitory seizures on esoteric flyfishing matters. He's well known for this. But one day on the upper Pott outside Maclear I tried the fly, at Ed's insistence, and took a lot of fish, and I mean a lot, maybe 50 or 60 in a morning's fishing. This I mistakenly put down to the fact that the river is heavily populated with blessedly unsophisticated trout who probably would have lunged at bent coat hooks if given half a chance. And although I was mildly impressed, I wasn't planning on any major lobbying campaigns around his new pattern right then.

But he remained insistent about the fly, insistent enough to make me take notice, even wonder again about the fish in the Pott that, on reflection, leaped at the fly as if they hadn't seen food in a week. And to cap it all, Ed started getting messages of support for the fly from far afield, via e-mail, fax, phone, everything short of a runner with a cleft stick, each singing praises for his hopper. It seemed that those brave enough to use it were hitting fish, often big fish, pretty regularly, just as Ed had claimed all these months.

So last Saturday when Ed and I fished the bottom beat of the Smalblaar on a hottish day, I tried the hopper again. Ed was already using one and taking trout, some of them big enough to make me nervous and highly inquisitive. My fishing until then had been slow, trout taking short or flashing too excitedly and missing altogether. I prefer trout when they rise slowly and confidently to the dry. Then I know, at least for the next hour or so, that I have got half a chance with them.

Anyway, I put on Ed's hopper and immediately a large trout came unstuck from the very bottom of a run and in a swoop got solidly hooked lifting the fly a clear foot out of the water. Standing side on to the run I saw the whole take, and wondered when I had last seen a trout come up to the fly with such determination. To cut a long story short we caught fish until our supply of Ed's hoppers ran out about mid afternoon, by when I was fast becoming a convert.

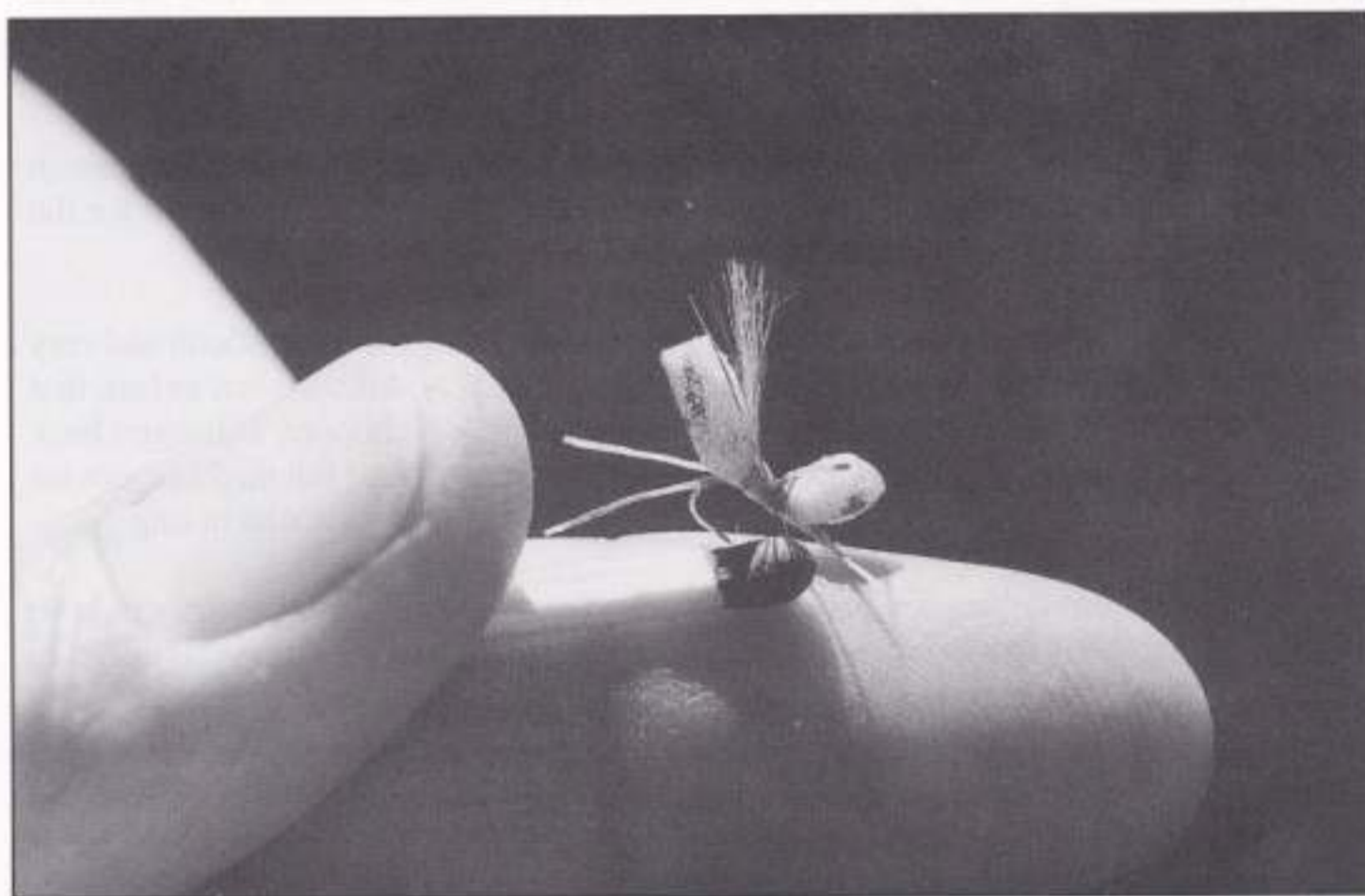
Next day I insisted we tie up a couple and, by the time the sun set on our makeshift bench out on the patio, I had a half dozen in my box and the same beat booked again for the following Tuesday.

This day the wind blew hard enough upstream to make mending the line difficult and very few fish were showing themselves on the top. The Hopper was slow, so slow in fact, that I changed to a nymph, but when the only fish taken fell to Ed's hopper, I changed back pretty smartly. In the end I dredged up a few reluctant trout on a day I felt might otherwise have been blank. I had to score full points to Ed's new fly on this particular outing.

The nice thing about fishing the pattern is that the foam floats it. Mind you, there is so much else on the hook that it only just floats. In fact in mildly turbulent freestone streams, such as we have in the Western Cape, the foam gradually takes up water and the fly sinks lower and lower in the water until it's really hard to follow. So I decided to add a spotter to it. I tied a few samples with fluorescent Poly-yarn mounted on the back where the foam is tied in. I tested it on yet another trip to the Smalblaar but it didn't work as well as I hoped. Simply greasing the fly very lightly with silicone paste, on the other hand, helped enormously. That kept the fly floating high enough to stay clearly visible for ages.



On the Smalblaar Tom Sutcliffe examines his 'Opper pattern ...



... which can be tied in fairly small sizes.

The triggers that induce trout to rise to this hopper are not located alone in the fat, elongated foam body. That's attractive enough as a silhouette I am sure, but it's common to most hopper designs. The Spanflex rubber legs, I suspect, make the real difference. These are mottled with a permanent ink marker in shades of red, yellow, brown and black. (Look, I never said this was an easy fly to tie.) As you fish this hopper normally, say on a dead drift in a quick run, I imagine the legs move a fraction but not enough to excite the trout. If you give the fly some action with rod tip though, the legs move like mad. This is often an irresistible trigger to fish and it's one of the positive features in Ed's pattern that separates it from most others.

There are other features that make the fly if not unique, at least pretty striking. The wing is Golden pheasant tippet, rich orange feathers tipped and barred with jet-black. Interestingly, most Australian grasshopper patterns use Golden pheasant tippet as tails or legs but Ed's use of them in the wing is different and I think very imaginative. To bring in the touch of red, Ed runs two short pieces of maroon Kristalflash along the sides, though he is experimenting with rust colours rather than red. Add all this together and like I said, this is a very striking and colourful fly.

Tying it is no cakewalk. I always look for ease of tying in new patterns and by streamlining techniques I can produce a passable Zak nymph in four minutes, including the brass bead at the head, a Hare's Ear nymph in about five, a perfectly fishable DDD in seven and so on. But Ed's Hopper is just not that sort of a fly. It takes time to tie; I won't say exactly how long, but it's coming down off 15 minutes for me right at the moment. Here's what's needed:

First, get hold of a few small, Orvis Quick-Sight foam ant bodies. These are brown foam cylinders tipped in white so you can see the fly better. A phone call to dealers like Roger Baert, Mark Yelland or John Yelland at Upstream, will source them for you. The white foam tip is good enough for visibility on slow rivers, but as I said, not quite good enough for the fast water in the Cape. Or so Ed says. He could see them clearly on the slow, smooth waters of the Barkly district far more easily than he could on the fast water in the Cape. For clear tracking you need to build in an additional spotter or dress the fly with silicone.

Use a heavy, wet fly hook, #14 is a good cure-all size though I made up some 16's and they look good. If you use lighter dry fly hooks the weight on the shank tends to flip the fly on its back which, as you would imagine, is not so good for presentation. Dress the hook shank with pale yellow silk (thereby hangs a tail but I'll come back to it a little later) and put a small drop of Superglue on the wrappings about a third back from the eye (not quite kosher in the delicate art of fly tying and a minor admission of technical defeat I know, but the stuff has its uses. Without Superglue the body will continually spin around the shank and drive you quietly mad). Settle the foam body on top of the glue. Anchor the body with a couple of firm turns of silk around the shank. This tilts up the foam abdomen and head, forming a deep 'V' at the 'waist'. The body should just protrude beyond the end of the hook and the white spotter should neatly line up with the eye.

Now tie in the Golden pheasant tippet in the 'V' of the waist so that it protrudes, but only just, beyond the end of the foam. Ed puts a piece of red Kristalflash along with the Golden Pheasant tippet wing but I don't know that the trout can see it up there although he says

it's not to help the trout spot the fly as much as it is to help the angler. I prefer to tie the Kristalflash in so that it protrudes out the back of the fly, but the choice is yours.

The Spanflex legs are white, round rubber strips that you segment with coloured Koki pens, using yellows, reds (liberally), browns and black in any design you like. A tip here is to lay out a whole bunch of rubber legs on a flat surface and tap them at random with different colours until you have little of the white rubber left showing. It takes a few minutes but it's better than doing each leg separately. Life's too short for that. Tying the rubber legs on takes a little practice but aim to have two out front, preferably made from thinner Spanflex to act as 'antennae', then one leg on either side in the middle and two trailing legs out the back. Make these a little shorter than longer otherwise the rubber will twist around the hook shank on every cast. Take a black Koki pen and draw in two prominent eyes (another great trigger on hoppers) on either side of the white foam head.

I said I'd come back to the question of the colour yellow in trout flies. While Ed and I were going out to the river the other day, breezing through green vineyards, heading for the purple mountains of Du Toit's Kloof, he read excerpts from Gary LaFontaine's book *The Dry Fly - New Angles*. In one of the paragraphs Gary points out that yellow is a danger colour and consequently should best be avoided in flies. Well, I'm not too sure about that. I mean how many trout haven't been caught on the Invicta over the years, and a hundred other patterns besides that use yellow as a predominant colour. Perhaps it would be enough to pay some respect to this bleak theory though, avoiding predominantly yellow, or intensely bright yellow flies. Who knows. Sad thing is we had both tied up a half dozen hoppers using a bright yellow foam Ed had found. (He punches the body out of a solid half-inch thick sheet with a leather punch.) After reading LaFontaine's little piece neither of us used our yellow hoppers. And I won't tie any more either. Just in case LaFontaine is right.

Testing is the only way you get to know a fly and, more importantly, how to fish it. I used the pattern again on the Smalblaar, fishing with Gerard Barnardt, the new chairman of the CPS. But the day before I had trotted alone up the tiny Kaaimansgat tributary of the Holsloot, and first used a Zak. Result: the fish were still there (it's been year since I last fished this fragile place and I was worried whether the trout had survived) and I took six of them in double quick time using small, unweighted, very sparse flies. Then I put on one of Ed's Hoppers. The trout took it confidently enough, though with not the same level of intensity. Still, it was a big fly for this stream, probably the biggest morsel any of these trout had seen in a year and they are a little choosy up there, suggesting the pattern had passed even the most critical of close inspection tests.

On the Smalblaar, Gerard fished his wispy, quill bodied dry flies, landing them like goose down on his #2 weight, One Ounce Orvis. He fished very well, searching the runs with great attention, avoiding drag and casting beautifully and we pretty well shared run for run. I used the hopper 90% of the time and I suspect, were we to exactly add up the individual scores at the end of the day, there was very little difference in the results we got. When we got to any of the deep slots we knew must hold trout but failed with the dries, I occasionally tried a nymph. Interestingly, I never had a touch on them and neither did Gerard. Now this was not a perfect hopper day really. There was no sign of fly on the water, no hatch and no terrestrial activity at all. So the scores to the hopper and the conventional dry fly were about even on a day when I would anyway have expected the dry to have done a little better than a big hopper pattern.

So my case rests for the moment. I am well pleased with Ed's new fly so far, but I suspect that the final model has yet not completely evolved. For interest I will add a few sketches of the tying sequence as it is right now, as long as you understand that these are dynamic times and what you see here today could change, more than just a little, by tomorrow.

